

Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus" (1883)

Emma Lazarus' famous words, "Give me your tired, your poor,/Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free" may now be indelibly engraved into the collective American memory, but they did not achieve immortality overnight. In fact, Lazarus' sonnet to the Statue of Liberty was hardly noticed until after her death, when a patron of the New York arts found it tucked into a small portfolio of poems written in 1883 to raise money for the construction of the Statue of Liberty's pedestal. The patron, Georgina Schuyler, was struck by the poem and arranged to have its last five lines become a permanent part of the statue itself. More than twenty years later, children's textbooks began to include the sonnet and Irving Berlin wrote it into a Broadway musical. By 1945, the engraved poem was relocated--including all fourteen lines-- to be placed over the Statue of Liberty's main entrance.

Today the words themselves may be remembered a great degree more than the poet herself, but in Lazarus' time just the opposite was true. As a member of New York's social elite, Emma Lazarus enjoyed a privileged childhood, nurtured by her family to become a respected poet recognized throughout the country for verses about her Jewish heritage. A reader and a dreamer, Lazarus had the good fortune to claim Ralph Waldo Emerson as a pen-pal and mentor. Before her death at age 37, Lazarus grew from a sheltered girl writing flowery prose about Classical Antiquity to a sophisticated New York aristocrat troubled by the violent injustices suffered by Jews in Eastern Europe.

In "The New Colossus," Lazarus contrasts the soon-to-be installed symbol of the United States with what many consider the perfect symbol of the Greek and Roman era, the Colossus of Rhodes. Her comparison proved appropriate, for Bartholdi himself created the Statue of Liberty with the well-known Colossus in mind. What Bartholdi did not intend, however, was for the Statue of Liberty to become a symbol of welcome for thousands of European immigrants. As political propaganda for France, the Statue of Liberty was first intended to be a path of enlightenment for the countries of Europe still battling tyranny and oppression. Lazarus' words, however, turned that idea on its head: the Statue of Liberty would forever on be considered a beacon of welcome for immigrants *leaving* their mother countries.

Just as Lazarus' poem gave new meaning to the statue, the statue emitted a new ideal for the United States. Liberty did not only mean freedom from the aristocracy of Britain that led the American colonists to the Revolutionary War. Liberty also meant freedom to come to the United States and create a new life without religious and ethnic persecution. Through Lazarus' poem, the Statue of Liberty gained a new name:

She would now become the "Mother of Exiles," torch in hand to lead her new children to American success and happiness.

The full text of the poem is as follows:

The New Colossus

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame,
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

by Emma Lazarus, New York City, 1883